

# ART PAPERS

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INGRIDMWANGIROBERTHUTTE







## Raw Acts Gracefully Posed: IngridMwangiRobertHutter's Social Performance

TEXT / REBECCA DIMLING COCHRAN

Speaking at her recent exhibition at the Spelman College Museum of Fine Art in Atlanta, Ingrid Mwangi referenced a statement by the artist Joseph Beuys in which he stressed the importance of finding and exposing the inner wound. While she and her husband-collaborator Robert Hutter prefer to leave their work open to individual interpretation, her cursory comment provided an interesting framework for considering their practice. In much of their work, the artists address personal or societal wounds, eloquently working to heal and gain strength from the experience.

The two artists began their collaboration at the Hochschule der Bildenden Künste in Germany in the mid-1990s. In time, they came to consider their practice as inseparable—"one artist two bodies"—and thus exhibit under their combined names IngridMwangiRobertHutter. While their work enlists video, installation, and photography, it is inherently performative.

The two artists rarely appear in the same work: one is usually behind the camera as the other performs. In addition, they have very dif-

ferent performance styles. As such, the works feel quite different, depending on who takes the lead role. Mwangi, who has an exquisite voice, leans on vocal improvisation to amplify her physical actions; Hutter is most often silent, frequently turning his back on the viewer, de-singularizing his body in order to cast it as a stand-in for mankind. This sets them apart from many other duos whose collaborations are premised on the subsumption of the individual—like Fischli and Weiss and the Chapman Brothers or even collaborative couples such as Bernd and Hilla Becher or Tim Noble and Sue Webster. As disparate as they may feel, IngridMwangiRobertHutter's works share a vision: they all plumb the depths of painful experiences and explore the cathartic nature of art.

Mwangi grew up in Nairobi with a German mother and Kenyan father. At the age of sixteen, she moved to Germany, where, for the first time, she experienced being cast as an "other." The powerful large-scale video projection *Neger Don't Call Me*, 2000, is based on that experience. The work relies on a grid of nine images: in each

Mwangi has woven her hair in dreadlocks and wrapped them around the front of her head in different fashions to disguise her visage. Occasionally the video will cut to a single frame, highlighting one of Mwangi's nine enactments of stereotypes of black people—like a robber or a wild animal. In the soundtrack, she recounts the racism that she encountered as a person of color in Germany and the introspective path she followed in order to identify which parts of her were black, which were white, and to determine where she fit in. Strategically installed, the audio is distributed across a number of speakers mounted on the ceiling and hidden in the four simple wooden chairs that face the projection. This sonic environment tangibly translates the sense of schizophrenia that one can imagine echoed in her head as she grappled with doubt, confusion, anger, and resistance to the labels imposed on her by others.

In the three-channel video installation *Splayed*, 2004, Mwangi confronted another personal trauma. The work comprises three flatscreen monitors hung high on the wall in a

OPPOSITE, TOP TO BOTTOM: IngridMwangiRobertHutter, still from *Eastleigh Crossing*, 2009, single-channel video, 7:48 minutes; IngridMwangiRobertHutter, still from *Creepcreature*, 2009, single-channel video, 4:56 minutes [courtesy of IngridMwangiRobertHutter] / ABOVE: IngridMwangiRobertHutter, *Hell's Gate*, 2009, c-print, 693 x 125 cm [Spelman College Museum of Fine Art Collection; purchased with support from the Friends of the Museum in honor of the 15 x15 acquisitions initiative]

triangular configuration. Mwangi's head occupies the central panel, her right and left forearm respectively stretch across the other two screens. As such, she seems to be standing, arms outstretched, in a pose similar to a crucifixion. Eyes downcast, her expression remains impassive as a knife-clutching hand carves the word "monogamous" into her right forearm while another simultaneously carves "polygamy" into her left. Like Marina Abramovic's performance *Lips of Thomas*, 1975, in which the artist cut a five-pointed star into her stomach using a razor blade, Mwangi turns her body into a canvas and her blood into the paint. The performance serves as an elegant metaphor for the hurt and

indelible scars caused by one of her parents' infidelity.

In 2005, Mwangi and Hutter made their collaboration official, retroactively attributing all of their work to their combined practice. This also signals a subtle shift, as the work seems to move away from specifically autobiographical experiences to more universal concerns or conditions.

This change in approach is also reflected in works such as the single-channel video *Constant Triumph*, 2008, where neither of the artists appears. Projected onto two overlaid floating scrimms, which lends the image an ethereal quality, the incredibly moving narrative follows Mwangi's sister Helen

Mwangi-Taylor as she confronts the pain, fear, and eventual solace in her struggle against the cancer that claimed her life. A professional singer for whom appearance was important, we experience her anguish as she loses her hair and her fingernails begin to fall off. We hear the fear in her voice as she worries about the future of her children. And we sense our own human fragility as she traces the scar on her right chest where a tumor was removed—failing to rid her body of the evil disease. Still, despair never steps into the frame. Her spiritual *a cappella* singing and unflinching poise convey both dignity and perseverance. Mwangi's sister teaches us the alternative to bowing down under the weight of death: to gain strength and transcend. *Constant Triumph* is pure inspiration, brought to us from one who has already passed into another world yet come back to show us the way.

The incredibly poignant video *The Cage*, 2009, similarly enlists grace and understanding, albeit in a totally different context. For this performance Hutter, a white European, inhabited a fenced-off construction on a busy Johannesburg street rarely frequented by people of his color. Totally silent and temporarily blinded by patches he placed on his eyes, Hutter began a slow courtship with the skeptical crowd, drawing them in with each action. After walking around his enclosure a few times, he sat down and made the humble gesture of shaving his head. He then cut pieces from his shirt, packing them with clumps of hair into small plastic bags and offering them to spectators by hanging them from the rungs of the metal fence. The gathered crowd eyed the packages warily with few venturing to take them. Hutter then leaned against the fence with pens in hand, inviting the crowd to write on his back. After the first few brave souls stepped forward,





more jumped in and the scene became quite animated. People took the bags and lined up to manifest their thoughts on this subservient blind white man. Some simply signed their names or drew pictures. Others became bolder, writing AFRICA, FREE, and KILLER. One even drew a swastika. *The Cage* staged a seemingly cathartic experience for the colonized to look and write upon the colonizer, expressing their feelings without fear of judgment or recrimination.

Crowd response is an important component of IngridMwangiRobertHutter's work. In *Eastleigh Crossing*, 2009, which the artists define as a guerilla action, Mwangi ventured to a section of Nairobi known to harbor refugees from Somalia. Her help was welcomed by a taxi trying to get through a flooded street and by pedestrians who enjoyed her beautiful singing. But when she turned the tables on them and began to moan and scream in anguish, they shied away from her. The inhabitants of Eastleigh Crossing, after whom the video was named, have most likely experienced their own per-

sonal agony but the public display clearly unnerved them. While she had helped or taken the time to listen to them, no one stopped to help her. Like Kimsooja's *A Beggar Woman*, 2000-2001, in which the artist sat cross-legged with her arm outstretched for alms in crowded squares in Cairo, Lagos, and Mexico City, the performance becomes as much about the crowd's response as the artist's actions, displaying widespread social apathy and fear of "the other."

Exposing the fallacy and the harm caused by this lack of human connectedness is at the heart of IngridMwangiRobertHutter's photographic triptych *Hell's Gate*. Taken outside of Nairobi, the photograph memorializes Kenya's massive 2009 drought. In the left panel, a Kongoni—a small African antelope—stares solemnly at the camera. Its brown color, which would normally camouflage it in the surrounding bush, stands out against the gray, dying foliage. In the central panel, Mwangi sits as if praying over the carcass of a zebra. Its skin intact, it is clear that this animal succumbed not to predators but to

Mother Nature. The right panel shows Mwangi, Hutter, and a friend standing in front of their car, looking like intruders in this desolate landscape. Their presence, however, reminds us that some people's actions can hurt many as the effects of global warming spread miles from where the most grievous infractions take place.

IngridMwangiRobertHutter's work is not easy to watch. Though beautifully presented, their performances, videos, and photographs elicit very raw emotions. Race, gender, national identity, fidelity, and death come under their scrutiny. Through their engagement with these issues, they offer us an opportunity for growth, change, and even transcendence.

Rebecca Dimling Cochran is a curator and writer based in Atlanta. She frequently contributes to *Art in America*, *Sculpture*, *Artforum.com* and *ArtsCriticATL.com*.

OPPOSITE: IngridMwangiRobertHutter, *Neger Don't Call Me*, 2000, video projection, 4 chairs with loudspeakers, 11:34 minutes [courtesy of The Heather and Tony Podesta Collection, Washington, DC] / ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: IngridMwangiRobertHutter, *Constant Triumph*, 2008, single-channel video, 18:53 minutes [courtesy of IngridMwangiRobertHutter]; IngridMwangiRobertHutter, *Splayed*, 2004, three-channel video, one channel: 10:47 minutes, looped; two channels: 14:21 minutes, looped [courtesy of IngridMwangiRobertHutter]